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Toward a Buddhist Theory of Structural Peace: Lessons from Myanmar in Transition

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the result of in-depth interviews that the author conducted with Burmese Buddhist leaders, with a view toward building Buddhist theories of social conflict, reconciliation, and structural peace. Findings include their shared understanding of the deeply spiritual, inner-directed nature of conflict and reconciliation, and their highly divergent, contested understandings of the structural roots of human suffering in today's globalized and interconnected world. To meet these structural challenges, this essay introduces the concept of structural awareness, which it defines as educated, enlightened consciousness to appreciate and act responsibly on the complex chains of causal relations in which well-intended action can inadvertently generate the suffering of others.

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Abstract

This essay analyzes the result of in-depth interviews that the author conducted with Burmese Buddhist leaders, with a view toward building Buddhist theories of social conflict, reconciliation, and structural peace. Findings include their shared understanding of the deeply spiritual, inner-directed nature of conflict and reconciliation, and their highly divergent, contested understandings of the structural roots of human suffering in today's globalized and interconnected world. To meet these structural challenges, this essay introduces the concept of structural awareness, which it defines as educated, enlightened consciousness to appreciate and act responsibly on the complex chains of causal relations in which well-intended action can inadvertently generate the suffering of others.

Introduction

This inquiry contributes to building a theory and practice of Buddhist approaches to conflict transformation and peacebuilding. Conflict transformation refers to a sustained process of relationship-building aimed at enabling conflict parties to develop an in-depth, systematic, and multi-angled understanding of the sources and dynamics of the conflict at hand and use the renewed understanding to re-channel the conflict energy inherent in their relationships in order to build sustainable, nonviolent coexistence.

A case study selected for this purpose focuses on Myanmar, a Buddhist-majority nation undergoing a historical transition from decades of military rule to democracy. Based on a series of in-depth interviews that this author has conducted with influential Buddhist leaders in 2013, the study seeks to articulate how they view the sources and nature of social conflict in general, how they understand reconciliation, and how they describe structural violence, all from a Buddhist theological perspective.

Structural violence (Galtung, 1969) is a well-established concept in peace and conflict research. It suggests that violence, as a harming, incapacitating effect on the human body, mind, and spirit, exists not only in its direct, physical form, but also in an indirect, structural form. Structural violence thus finds its expression in routinized and entrenched relationships. At the core of these relationships is a systematic, categorical denial of access to resources and opportunities that human beings need for their physiological, spiritual, and social survival. Examples of structural violence include political repression (as in totalitarian rule and military occupation) and economic exploitation (as in hyper-capitalism and commercial fundamentalism).

This study's focus on the link between structural violence and Buddhism is both significant and timely. As a religious tradition committed to overcoming human suffering and achieving enlightenment, Buddhism is relatively modest in terms of the scope of the discourse it offers on social structure, especially on matters related to governance, economic production, and resource allocation. (In contrast, Islam, for example, explicitly teaches zakat, a religious duty to make offerings to the poor, to ensure greater economic equity.) In the age of increasingly globalized economy and modern state structure, however, the traditional Buddhist belief that mindfulness and good intentions necessarily lead to both inner and outer peace is seriously challenged. At the heart of this challenge is the recognition that in today's interconnected world, cause-and-effect relationships between one's action and its unintended consequences, as exemplified by global climate change and North-South economic relations, are so structurally complex and pervasive that the actor is socially responsible but unaware of his or her responsibility. Buddhist-majority societies that explicitly place Buddhist philosophy at the heart of nation-building must exercise a great degree of caution because their religious beliefs can make it difficult for them to self-critically examine whether and how their well-intended actions can unknowingly harm others. To respond to this challenge, the discussion that follows advocates the need to build structural awareness, which is defined as educated consciousness that seeks to understand both visible and invisible causal chains of action and inaction that either generate or transform structural roots of human suffering.

From the perspective of contemporary peace and conflict studies that have evolved primarily in the Western World, this study is an attempt to further diversify and globalize their religious, cultural, and philosophical foundations. It is informed by the observation that the more diverse, locally-generated theories of peace are available, the less likely the conflict parties in

these local contexts will need to rely on unfamiliar concepts and methods exported from outside, most frequently from Western society. Myanmar, as an Asian country undergoing numerous conflicts, represents a prime example of a non-Western society in need of diverse homegrown theories of peace and conflict.

Given this conceptual background, the following discussion consists of four parts. First, it will describe the methodology of the inquiry. Second, it will introduce the social and historical context of Myanmar and the role of the Buddhist community in Burmese society. This second section includes a brief review of the growing scholarship on Buddhist nationalism and social activism and contextualizes the present inquiry from the viewpoint of this scholarship. Third, it will present the major findings on Buddhist perspectives on conflict, reconciliation, and structural violence. Fourth and final, it will conclude with a possible way forward that the Burmese Buddhist community can take with emphasis on the structural nature of social conflicts it faces.

Methodology

The analysis presented in this paper draws on fifty-two interviews, eleven focus group meetings, and four capacity-building workshops on conflict transformation that the present author conducted in Myanmar in August 2013. About eighty percent of these interviews and meetings were carried out in Burmese and interpreted in English. The mean length of the interviews and meetings was approximately 75 minutes.

These interviews and meetings involved religious leaders of the Buddhist, Hindu, Muslim, and Christian backgrounds, members of political parties, government officials, media professionals, public intellectuals, and civil society organizations (CSO) leaders, including women and youth groups. The interviews and meetings took place in five cities – Mandalay, Meiktila (Mandalay Division), Taunggyi (Shan State), Sittwe (Rakhine State), and Yangon. (See the map in Attachment 1.) While these activities surveyed a broad range of peace, conflict, and development issues in relation to Myanmar's democratic transition, a large part of the interviews and meetings was dedicated specifically to an analysis of Burmese Buddhist perspectives on peace and conflict. Fifteen of these interviews and four of the focus group meetings involved Buddhist monks, nuns, and secular Buddhist organizations that work on peace, development, humanitarian, and human rights issues. While this subset of the collected data that focuses

specifically on Buddhism forms the basis of this paper, the information collected for the whole of the research has proven invaluable to contextualize and make sense of Buddhist perspectives.

At least one third of these fifteen Buddhist interviewees are nationally-recognized Buddhist leaders, all actively engaged in broad-based social movements. Approximately half of the Buddhist interviewees, including these recognized national leaders, publicly advocate either the Buddhist-led 969 movement to serve Buddhist business interests or the national Buddhist campaign for introducing a marriage law to the legislature for the purpose of protecting Buddhist women, or both. (A more detailed description of each of these movements is forthcoming.) The remaining half of the Buddhist interviewees are Buddhist leaders – mostly religious, some secular – with substantial experience in either local, national, or international leadership. This latter category of Buddhist interviewees takes noticeably different approaches to the question of Buddhist patriotism and Buddhist-Muslim relations from those leading the 969 movement and the campaign on the proposed marriage law. Religious interviewees are predominantly monks and include a few nuns. Their ages range from the 30s to 80s. Four focus-group meetings supplemented these one-on-one interviews. Representatives of Buddhist youth organizations, both male and female, participated in the focus-group meetings.

Grounded theory (Strauss, 1987) informed the entire process of data collection and analysis. This theory advocates a systematic, discovery-oriented method of field-based inquiry that seeks to identify patterns of observed social phenomena in order to construct relevant theories. It suggests an antidote to the kind of well-established methods that apply pre-determined theories to the explanation of social phenomena. Concretely, to select interviewees, this author and a small team of well-connected Burmese Buddhist guides first approached a broad range of Buddhist leaders and organizational representatives whose publicized positions on important social activities and movements had widely been known. As mentioned earlier, the selection process also took into account the need for diversity with respect to ethnicity, gender, and age, for these factors play a decisive role in Burmese society. This initial application of purposive sampling, which purposefully identifies interviewees of selected types, was later supplemented by solicited referrals of additional interviewees whose perspectives promised to help examine emerging theories that the ongoing analysis had generated. The final analysis of the interview notes also followed grounded theory in that it sought to identify patterns, as well as evocative irregularities and departures from pattern that suggest potentially important aspects of

Burmese Buddhist theories of peace and conflict. These patterns were categorized and presented in the form of recurring narratives and themes that the interviewees with different organizational and demographic backgrounds offered. The English-speaking Burmese guides to this author, all with advanced degrees in Buddhist studies, assisted in the interpretation of Buddhist concepts and Burmese terms.

The combined effect of the relatively small sample size and non-probability sampling suggests that the findings are neither exhaustive in scope nor conclusive in nature. As demonstrated by the analysis that follows, however, this inquiry has generated highly evocative hypotheses about both the uniformity and diversity of self-reported Buddhist narratives on peace and conflict. They suggest a promising basis for a much broader scope of rigorous empirical research.

The interview questions used for this inquiry asked the respondents to reflect on their understanding of social conflict, reconciliation, and structural violence, three of the many essential concepts that must be explored to understand Burmese Buddhist approaches to peacebuilding and conflict transformation. These questions and concepts will be explained in greater detail in the following sections.

Background of Myanmar and its Buddhist Community

As of July 2014, Myanmar is a country with 56 million people (CIA, 2015). Its multi-cultural nation consists of 135 recognized ethnic communities. Sixty-eight percent of Myanmar's population is ethnic Burman (CIA, 2015), whose relationships with such minority groups as Shan (nine percent) in the east, Karen (seven percent) in the southeast, Rakhine (four percent) in the west, and Mon (two percent) in the south have been strained because of the long-standing majority-minority conflicts over political representation, resource allocation, human rights, and a host of other issues. Eighty-nine percent of the Burmese population is Buddhist, four percent Christian, and four percent Muslim, while the rest consist of Hindus, animists, and diverse others (CIA, 2015). Bordering five neighboring countries, Bangladesh, India, China, Thailand, and Laos, Myanmar's multi-ethnic and multi-religious society represents a crossroads of cultures in Southeast Asia.

Against this backdrop of cultural diversity, Buddhism has played an indispensable role in shaping the basic character of the Burmese nation throughout the past millennium. Theravada

Buddhism's central role in Burmese politics was first institutionalized in 1057, when King Anawrahta of the Pagan Empire formally adopted Theravada Buddhism as a spiritual guide to his politically unified Burmese nation ("Myanmar Profile," 2015). This Buddhist-majority character of the Burmese nation has essentially remained intact throughout the tumultuous periods of British colonialism in 1824-1948 and the Japanese invasion in 1942-45. Since the nation's independence in 1948, under tightly controlled military rule, the successive national leaders have either actively promoted Buddhism as a state religion or otherwise mobilized a Buddhist discourse to legitimize their political status (Steinberg, 2010). This national commitment to upholding Buddhist ideals and a Buddhist-inspired way of governance has often taken place at the cost of marginalizing the country's religious minorities, including Muslims and Christians.

Historically the Burmese Buddhist community has grown under state protection and gained strong popular support. Selected statistics on the Burmese Buddhist community, summarized in the table below, show the broad popular base of the Buddhist community:

TABLE A: SELECTED STATISTICS ON THE BURMESE BUDDHIST COMMUNITY.

Monasteries	57,000
Monks (over 18 years old)	250,000
Novices	300,000
Nuns	43,000

Source: Steinberg (2010, p. xxv)

There has recently been a steady rise in the number of novices who enter monasteries, especially in poor rural areas. According to a senior monk overseeing the administration of monasteries at the national level, this increase is attributed largely to the rise in the number of families who cannot afford to send their children to government schools and consider the monasteries' free education as the only alternative available (personal communication, Mandalay, August 10, 2013).

Recent trends in Myanmar's democratization, including the multi-party national election in November 2010, represent an unprecedented shift in the way the military government, previously under the one-party rule of the Union Solidarity and Development Party (USDP), has chosen to interact with its political opponents, such as the National League for Democracy (NLD) leader Aung San Suu Kyi. The liberalization of the domestic and international media has increased the visibility of the long-standing tension over ethnic, religious, and socio-economic differences that the military government has long sought to contain. One of these differences that have most seriously escalated to the point of provoking inter-communal violence in 2012 is the conflict between the Buddhist and Muslim communities in Rakhine State, near Bangladesh, as well as in the mixed-religious cities of Meiktila in Mandalay Division and Lashio in Shan State. A series of attacks and counterattacks that had taken place since 2012 between the Rakhine Buddhist and Muslim (Rohingya) communities have deepened their mistrust and resentment. The Rakhine conflict has also significantly deepened the already polarized Buddhist-Muslim relations throughout Myanmar. For the Buddhist community, the fear of expanding Islamic influence, which many Buddhist leaders attribute to Burmese Muslims' financial, political, and ideological ties to sympathetic Muslim supporters in South Asia and the Middle East, justifies the decisive Buddhist action to defend their faith, as well as the historical continuity and integrity of the Burmese nation (personal communications with Buddhist leaders, Mandalay and Rakhine, August 11-15, 2013). As an already marginalized minority group, the Muslim community in turn feels increasingly alienated from Myanmar's cultural, political, and economic life (personal communications with Muslim leaders, Mandalay and Yangon, July 25-27, 2014).

Two of the interconnected Buddhist movements reflect the Buddhist understanding of these challenges and their response. One of them is the 969 movement, a Buddhist-led nationwide campaign aimed at building unity among Buddhists, including lay believers. A concrete action adopted by the movement's proponents includes disseminating stickers that display a Buddhist symbol representing an ancient pillar that King Ashoka, a famous Buddhist ruler, constructed in the third century BC to promote unity among his subjects in the Indian sub-continent. (See Attachment 2 for the 969 symbol.) The three digits of 969 each correspond to the number of virtues associated with each of the three objects of reverence – the Buddha, the dhamma (the teachings), and the sangha (the community of monks) – known as the Triple Gems. Today a large number of Buddhist-own businesses, including street vendors, small restaurants,

and taxis, publicly display these stickers to support the 969 movement, willingly or not, following the monks' instructions. While the stated goal of the 969 movement emphasizes the need for mutual support among Buddhists to patronize businesses owned by fellow Buddhists displaying these stickers, there exists a widespread practice of Buddhist sermons and publicity material disseminated to encourage boycotting Muslim-owned businesses. Muslim community leaders and business owners interviewed by the author confirm severe adversarial effects of the 969 movement on their economic livelihood, while Buddhist leaders interviewed strongly deny the movement's responsibility for causing adversarial impact on Muslim-owned businesses (personal communications, Yangon and Mandalay, August 3-15, 2014). Regardless of whether the 969 movement intentionally excludes Muslims, it is important to note that its leading proponents' determination to spread the movement nationwide was solidified by the Organization of Islamic Organization's (OIC) intervention in the Rakhine conflict and its attempt to establish OIC's Myanmar office in 2012 (personal communication with a senior 969 leader, Yangon, August 3, 2013).

The second Buddhist response to the challenge of Buddhist-Muslim relations is a national movement that encourages both the general public and the national parliament to adopt a set of laws aimed at resolving a range of contentious issues concerning interreligious marriage. Under the leadership of the Buddhist-led Central Nationality and Religion Safeguarding Association, this broad-based movement seeks to change the existing practices of Muslim men marrying Buddhist women who typically come from economically disadvantaged households and regions. In many cases of these interreligious marriages, Buddhist wives are converted to Islam following their husbands' faith. This Buddhist movement also advocates monogamous marriage and seeks to control population growth, in an attempt to tackle what many Buddhists view as a social problem caused by Islamic practices that threaten the moral character of their Buddhist-majority nation. In July 2013, the Central Nationality and Religion Safeguarding Association submitted to the president four draft laws, which deal with religious conversion, interreligious marriage, monogamy, and population control, respectively, along with some 1.3 million signatures to petition for their passage in the national parliament ("President urges Speaker," 2014).

In view of the broader historical context of Buddhist-led social engagement that the recent scholarship on Buddhism examines, these two Burmese movements represent Myanmar's unique adaptations of contemporary Buddhist nationalism. According to Jerryson and

Juergensmeyer (2010), there are numerous historical precedents of Asian Buddhist communities that organized themselves to take strong direct action to defend their nations and advocate their political causes in the name of Buddhism. Jerryson and Juergensmeyer (2010) demonstrate that Buddhist communities in such countries as Sri Lanka, Thailand, Mongolia, China, and Japan have frequently used Buddhist scriptures, mythologies, and institutional influence to justify their use of direct and structural violence. Jerryson's (2011) ethnographic study examines militarized monasteries and armed monks in southern Thailand's Muslim-majority communities and demonstrates how deeply-entrenched Buddhist nationalism routinizes and normalizes a sustained systematic use of force. These empirical studies of politicized Buddhist nationalism show that Buddhist nations' political and military actions and their Buddhist-inspired discourses of nationalism powerfully reinforce each other, often to the extent that politics and religion become indistinguishable.

These studies of politicized Buddhist nationalism present an evocative contrast to another growing body of scholarship that examines the rise of engaged Buddhist movements. Engaged Buddhism is defined as an organized form of contemporary Buddhist practices that actively and nonviolently tackle social, political, economic, and environmental issues in such a way as to make a clear departure from the kind of solitary Buddhist practices that concentrate primarily on individual spiritual salvation (Queen, 2000; Queen & King, 1996). Many engaged Buddhist movements strive to apply such ethical and spiritual principles as compassion, loving-kindness, and the interdependence of all beings to organized public actions that seek to alleviate poverty, racial discrimination, and other forms of structural violence. A review of the writings by prominent engaged Buddhist authors such as Hanh (1987), Ghosananda (1992), Sivaraksa (2005), Chappell (1999), and King (2009) suggests that engaged Buddhist leaders generally trust the presumed social effect of their spiritually-guided actions on structural change. In this process, the nature of Buddhist concepts they articulate, unlike their social actions that demand concreteness and precision, is generally too abstract and generic to be useful as an actionable guideline for complex structural change. Experienced Buddhist scholar-practitioners such as Sivaraksa (2005) supplement Buddhist spiritual guidance with Western social scientific concepts to generate an integrated approach to the transformation of structural violence.

A comparison between the studies of Buddhist nationalism and violence, on the one hand, and those of engaged Buddhism, on the other, points to an important area of inquiry that

merits attention. While the former focuses on how social structure shapes Buddhist consciousness and identity, and vice versa, from a historical and empirical point of view, the latter explores how Buddhist consciousness and identity can guide structural transformation. From a comparative standpoint, there is a relative paucity in the depth and breadth of systematic action-oriented knowledge that can guide Buddhist-inspired structural transformation. On the contrary, there appears to be a more established basis of empirical and conceptual explanations as to how Buddhist-led structural violence interacts with Buddhist spirituality and identity.

Given this background, this study of Myanmar's Buddhist community seeks to expand the empirical and conceptual understanding of Buddhist approaches to the analysis and transformation of structural violence and conflict. The concept of structural awareness, as demonstrated shortly, contributes to bridging the gap between inner-directed Buddhist awareness and Buddhist social actions designed to advance structural transformation. In addition, structural awareness as an analytical framework integrates the insights from the empirical studies of politicized Buddhist nationalism, on the one hand, and the applied practice of engaged Buddhism, on the other, in order to develop a more coherent understanding of the dialectical relationship between the inner-directed and externally-directed nature of Buddhist thinking and social action.

Buddhist Perspectives on Peace and Conflict

The analysis of the interviews conducted for the present inquiry seeks to identify and present selected narratives that exemplify typical responses. These narratives illustrate an area of consensus, as well as a broad range and typology of divergent responses that illustrate areas of possible disagreement and contention. Each of the fifteen Buddhist interviewees is given a number (as in interviewee 1 and interviewee 2) in what follows, in order to establish a balance between anonymity and identity. Insights obtained from the four focus group meetings, to which no numbers are assigned, are incorporated as background information and cited explicitly when necessary.

Theme 1: Nature and sources of social conflict

In response to the question, "From a Buddhist perspective, where does social conflict come from?," the interviewees' perspectives are similar to one another. These responses include: greed, hatred, and wrong view (interviewee 1); egoism, illustrated by a Buddhist story on the

inability to remove a spear from one's heart (interviewee 3); bad intentions that hurt others (interviewee 5); and jealousy and envy, derived from wrong view (interviewee 9).

Two underlying themes connect these responses. First, they all describe human beings' inner attributes, especially about the inner working of human mind. Interviewee 1's response, for example, highlights greed, anger, and wrong view – the latter synonymous with foolishness and ignorance in Buddhist terms. These three qualities of human life are commonly referred to as three poisons. Buddhists consider the three poisons as the ultimate source of delusionary impulses and earthly desires that give rise to suffering.

It is important to contrast this Buddhist worldview of the origin – and by extension, the perceived nature – of social conflict with a well-established view of social conflict in contemporary peace and conflict studies. Johan Galtung (2010), a pioneer in the field, defines conflict as an incompatibility of goals pursued by two or more parties. Rubin, Pruitt, and Kim (1994), in their widely-used introductory textbook on conflict studies, define conflict as a “perceived divergence of interest, or a belief that the parties' current aspirations cannot be achieved simultaneously” (p. 5). Regardless of which perspective one adopts from the growing literature on peace and conflict research, one can argue that researchers and practitioners in the field essentially view social conflict as a challenge in relationships between two or more parties and that they understand people's inner qualities, such as anger, as a characteristic embedded in such conflict-prone relationships. In contrast, the Buddhist worldview of conflict, as illustrated by Burmese Buddhists' responses, places such inner attributes as anger, greed, and wrong view in the foreground of their conflict analysis, while seeing the resulting nature of externalized human relationships in the background. This Buddhist emphasis in conflict analysis reflects the enduring theme of the faith tradition whose ultimate purpose is to remove suffering and attain enlightenment – both decisively internal and intimate to the human body, mind, and spirit. Consequently, Buddhist practitioners understand the source, nature, and perceived effect of social conflict as a subjective, experiential process that is internal to their mind. Furthermore, these Buddhist practitioners generally interpret the resulting relationships as an externalized effect of what they view as an essentially internal process.

The second underlying theme derived from the Burmese Buddhist narratives suggests that the rise of social conflict results from a contraction of the human mind to a narrowly-defined sense of self, which makes human beings egoistic. From a Buddhist point of view, this means

that the human inability to acquire a right view and to appreciate the inherent interdependence and unity between oneself and others, as well as between sentient beings and insentient beings, generates myopic, egoistic behavior. According to this view, such negative behavior leads to social conflict. In other words, Buddhism views destructive conflict behavior as a failure to connect life's inherent potential to the vast spiritual universe of interdependence and unity. This second point becomes the basis of a Buddhist worldview of reconciliation and conflict transformation, to which we now turn.

Theme 2: Reconciliation

The most common response to the question, "From a Buddhist perspective, how do you describe reconciliation between parties involved in conflict?," was: practice patience and loving kindness (interviewees 1, 6, 7). Patience is the capacity and readiness to persevere in trying circumstances in pursuit of enlightenment. Loving kindness (metta) refers to universal love and friendship that embraces all beings without prejudice. Like the Buddhist worldview of social conflict, emphasis on patience and loving kindness suggests an inherently inner-directed spiritual nature of a Buddhist approach to reconciliation. It also suggests that reconciliation requires expanding one's universe of togetherness, true to the Buddha's teaching on the universality of compassion.

An equally prominent theme that many interviewees (1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, and 8) highlighted was the notion that reconciliation is a means by which to achieve a higher end of unity. Two kinds of responses illustrate this point. The first of these was presented by a prominent monk who opposes both the 969 movement and the proposed marriage law:

Reconciliation is ultimately about building unity and overcoming disunity. If people on opposing sides have ill will and wish to fight, they don't have good knowledge to inform their action, and they have a selfish mind, then they will never attain unity. We must practice loving kindness (metta) in thought, speech, and action in order to build unity. This narrative illustrates the interviewee's way of reasoning that reconciliation is a means by which to attain unity and that it is realized by right thought, speech, and action.

The second example is adopted from a senior monk who spearheads the marriage law campaign:

The Buddha taught that if one side apologizes, the other side should not retaliate. We must learn to forgive. There is a story about the Buddha working to prevent two

adversarial kingdoms from fighting. To build universal peace, we must see everyone as a member of our own family. We need to develop wisdom so that we can recognize the interconnectedness of all beings.

While this second narrative is not as explicit on the relationship between means and ends as in the first, it nevertheless suggests the imperative of forgiveness and wisdom, among other means, to realize interconnectedness and unity in human relationships.

Importantly, despite the opposing political views that these interviewees hold, there is no disagreement, at least not in theological terms, over the desirability of all-inclusive, all-encompassing unity that human beings in general and Buddhists in particular should strive for. This Buddhist consensus on unity as a goal reflects Buddhists' shared commitment to put into practice their realization that all phenomena in the universe are interconnected and that these phenomena arise and evolve incessantly according to the underlying cosmic rhythm of cause and effect. The Buddhist search for unity, therefore, is a moral and social practice aimed at attaining enlightenment by aligning and devoting one's life to this underlying rhythm of the universe.

In the reality of Burmese Buddhist practice, however, many obstacles stand in the way of realizing these visions of unity and reconciliation. Serious disagreements abound, for example, as to what concrete, practical means Buddhists should or should not adopt to attain unity, who decides the right means to take, and how Buddhists should behave when they face a perceived existential threat to the way of life in which Buddhist unity matters. At the heart of these questions lies the inescapable reality of organizational and political structure in which Buddhists with opposing views interact with one another, as well as with people practicing other religions.

Theme 3: Structural violence and peace

The last in a series of three questions under study is, "From a Buddhist point of view, how can we overcome structural violence?" Since the term structural violence cannot be translated easily into Burmese, a brief standardized explanation was added to the question. The explanation described the intent of the question that sought to elicit diverse Buddhist perspectives on how to overcome deep-rooted historical patterns of human relationships that reproduce and perpetuate harmful effects on the human body, mind, and spirit. Also added to the question was a brief reference to the trend of globalization that deepens the interconnectedness in human relationships and that multiplies the complexity of causal chains responsible for such harmful effects.

Responses to this third question were truly diverse. One respondent (interviewee 4) stated that Buddhism, as a system of teachings dedicated primarily to the enlightenment of each individual, does not offer any explicit view on an ideal social structure. Nearly all the respondents emphasized inner spiritual virtues, such as loving kindness (*metta*), compassion (*karuna*), joy for others' welfare and happiness (*mudita*), and the importance of feeling others' suffering with equanimity (*upekka*), as a Buddhist moral basis for overcoming structural violence.

While the analysis of the interviews has generated no uniform pattern of Buddhist thinking on structural violence, at least three respondents (interviewees 6, 7, and 8) pointed out the Buddhist concept of right livelihood as an essential requirement. Arguably, right livelihood is one of the most widely known and accepted Buddhist principles that suggest how to overcome structural violence, with emphasis on its economic manifestations. (See Schumacher (1999) on Buddhist economics on this subject.) This Buddhist ideal of non-exploitive, virtuous livelihood is an application of the five precepts, which prohibit killing, theft, sexual misconduct, lying, and drinking. The precept on the prohibition of theft suggests a broader social practice of abstention from taking what is not given. This precept, by implication, encourages working proactively to protect others' possessions. Such an expanded scope of the precept's application promotes positive peace (defined as the overcoming of not only direct violence, but also indirect, structural violence), which goes beyond negative peace (defined as the overcoming of direct violence, which Buddhists strive to realize by observing the five abstentions). Moreover, one respondent (interviewee 6) supplemented the discussion on right livelihood by adding his understanding that the five precepts ensure the fulfillment of basic human needs, that is, irreducible requirements of life, both material and non-material, without which human beings cannot survive. In short, these respondents essentially argued that Buddhism provides a spiritual and philosophical basis of structural equity.

To broaden the scope of discussion on structural violence, mention must be made on the structural contexts in which Burmese Buddhist leaders interact with one another, as well as with members of other religious communities, especially Muslims. To this end, analysis must focus not only on how these Buddhist interviewees describe what Buddhist practice should be, but also on what concrete action they actually take. Inference is made to answer this latter question based

on the useful clues that the interviewees offered on the kinds of action and inaction they are adopting in the face of structural challenges that concern economics, politics, and security.

The interviewees described a range of severe challenges of structural violence, to which some form of cultural violence (destructive cultural influence that justifies violence) is often inseparably linked. These structural challenges, which are simultaneously cultural in nature, include the following. Representative narratives adopted from the interviews are listed in what follows in order to show concrete examples of structural challenges:

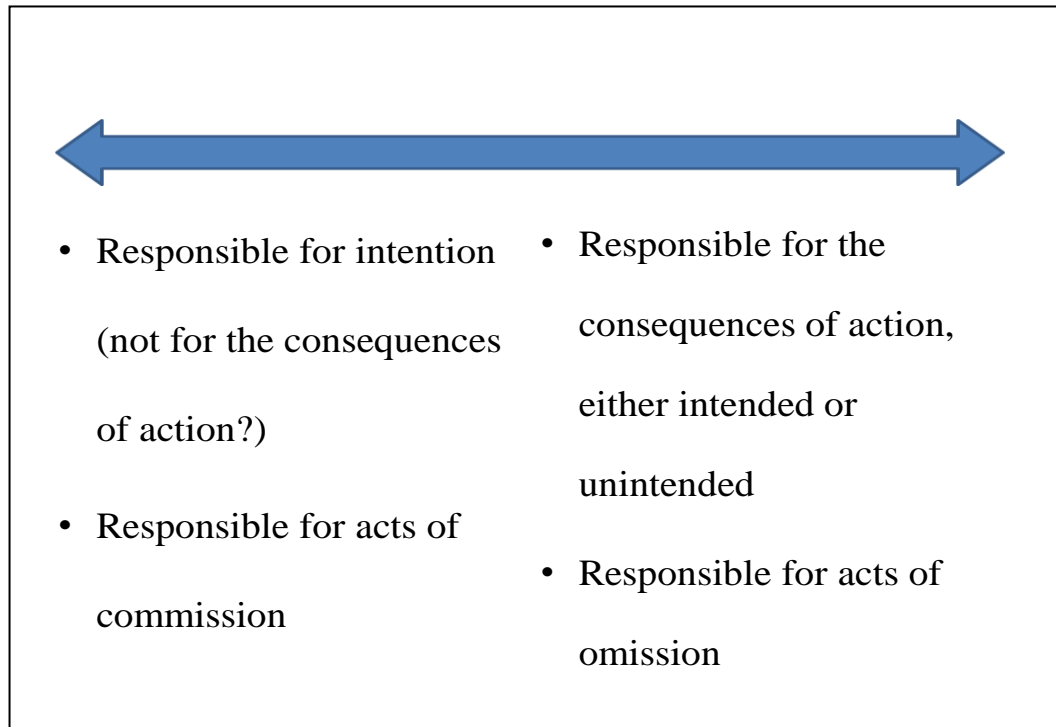
- *Fear of losing Myanmar's Buddhist heritage (1)*: "We are proud of our lineage of the historical Burmese kingdoms. After independence, there was a Muslim leader who became a minister of education. While we as Burmese [Buddhist] people accepted Muslims, they have tried to overwhelm us. If the current trend [of a growing Muslim population and influence] continues, our race and religion will one day disappear. Look at Bangladesh, Pakistan, Malaysia, and other nations in the region. They used to have a much greater proportion of Buddhist population. However, their national characters have changed significantly over time. These nations are increasingly under the influence of Islam and other religions. Will Myanmar eventually follow suit? We are organizing a national Buddhist movement [on interreligious marriage] in order to protect our nation and our religion." (Interviewee 5)
- *Fear of losing Myanmar's Buddhist heritage (2)*: "We started our 969 movement for two reasons. One is to build unity among Buddhists ... The second reason is to create a common symbol that enables all Buddhists to readily pay respect to the Triple Gems – the Buddha, the dhamma [the teachings], and the sangha [the community of monks]. ... The 969 symbol illustrates an ancient pillar that King Ashoka built. We chose this symbol because we respect the significant contribution he made to Buddhism. ... The immediate reason for starting the 969 movement was the OIC's [Organization of Islamic Cooperation] visit to Myanmar [in response to the Buddhist-Muslim tension in Rakhine State in 2012]. We thought we should build unity among Buddhists in Myanmar when the OIC came. If we can build a large social movement, we should be able to attain unity. Otherwise, our nation will one day disintegrate because of disunity." (Interviewee 6)
- *Need to defend Myanmar's Buddhist nation in the age of globalization*: "In today's increasingly globalized world, we see many religious communities interacting with one

another. These religious communities are getting closer to each other because of globalization. But while these trends grow, we cannot let any single group to dominate the rest of the other groups. To maintain a good balance between different groups, we as a Buddhist community must build a greater capacity to defend ourselves To build peace in Rakhine State, we have to do what Israel has done, to become more conscious of the need to protect our lives. There is a possibility of Arab attacks and wars that will be forced on us in Rakhine State. We need effective collective means of self-defense, such as a strong army and police, in order to protect Rakhine people. If we have these means, we will have peace in Rakhine State for a long time to come.” (Interviewee 8)

While these interviewees’ narratives refer to what they view as structural challenges, these narratives in fact reflect their own group identity that represents a collective and deeply internalized image of who they are and what they care about. A strong sense of in-group cohesion (unity among Buddhists) in the face of threats posed by out-groups (especially, Muslims, critical foreigners, and the media) is palpable.

Finally, it must be emphasized that the strong support of Buddhist-inspired patriotism and nationalism that the preceding narratives exemplify does not necessarily represent a universally accepted norm about how Burmese Buddhists hope to tackle structural challenges. There exists a much broader range of views, suggesting substantive room for disagreement, debate, and dialogue among influential Buddhist leaders. One way of illustrating the diversity of their perspectives is to think of a continuum that places a single-minded commitment to following good intentions as a guide to social action, on one end, and a commitment to shouldering responsibility for unintended social consequences, on the other:

ILLUSTRATION: A CONTINUUM OF BUDDHIST VIEWS ON STRUCTURAL VIOLENCE.



The left end of the continuum corresponds to a view shared by the proponents of the 969 and marriage law movements. It maintains that if the intentions that motivate and guide Buddhist social action are genuine and consistent with Buddhist teachings, then they will necessarily generate social impact that is harmless and beneficial to everyone in society. Consistent with this perspective, one interviewee, as a prominent national leader of the 969 movement, remarked:

All acts under Buddhism are harmless to everyone. Buddhist acts performed with good intentions are like a train moving on a railway. If a dog crosses the railway and is run over by the train, that's not the train's fault. That's the dog's fault.

In response to a follow-up question on his view on the reported cases of Muslim business losses that the Muslim interviewees attribute to the 969 movement, the same Buddhist leader answered:

These [Muslim] people's opinions are their own personal feelings that do not accurately reflect the true intent of the 969 movement. It is their perceptions, not the 969 movement itself, that are causing their suffering. Personally I don't know what assumptions they are making to cause the problems they are suffering from. There is nothing I can do about their problems because their own uninformed view is causing their suffering. We [as the

proponents of the 969 movement] have never advocated boycotting the businesses of the people of other religions. We have never intended to cause any harm to anyone.

In other words, those seeking the purity of intention based on Buddhism can trust the oneness of cause and effect, as well as the oneness of means and ends. Proponents of this perspective thus devote their religious practice to refrain from doing acts of commission, defined as acts that people knowingly and intentionally commit to do harm to others.

In contrast to this view, some Buddhist interviewees expressed a completely different perspective on this subject. They essentially argued that Buddhist compassion must unconditionally be extended to everyone at all times. They suggested that Buddhists should take action to overcome known circumstances of human suffering for which they may or may not be directly responsible. One of the interviewees who hold this view remarked:

The Buddha taught that we must take responsibility for the situation of suffering which we think we might have caused. Buddhist teachings also encourage us to think that even if we didn't create the particular situation of suffering, we should take action to remove the suffering. If you know the situation that caused the suffering, you have to take responsibility. ... The Buddha taught that our Buddhist consciousness must be able to see our deep bonds to our families, friends, nations, and the whole world.

This perspective suggests expanding the realm of Buddhists' social responsibility for removing the suffering of others regardless of the goodness of their intentions associated with the causal chain of events that have generated the suffering. This perspective also views the awareness of someone else's suffering as a sufficient reason in and of itself to take voluntary action, while setting aside the question of intention as secondary and non-essential in the face of the practical reality of human suffering. It invites Buddhist practitioners to reflect on acts of omission, defined as acts one should have taken but one has not in order to prevent the reality of suffering from arising.

The proposed continuum is undoubtedly an oversimplified view of far more complex patterns of Buddhist thinking regarding structural causality. As a preliminary way of conceptualizing a wide range of views, however, the continuum offers a useful starting point for self-reflection and dialogue because many other interviewees' perspectives fall somewhere between the two ends of this continuum.

Conclusion: Building Structural Awareness

The preceding analysis of Buddhist narratives has demonstrated a range of challenges that Burmese society faces today in the context of democratization, globalization, and interfaith relations. To overcome these challenges, this concluding section will answer the following questions: How can the Burmese Buddhist community build structural awareness under the structural constraints it has inherited from the past? How can Burmese Buddhists expand their capacity to build a more inclusive multi-religious nation that upholds its integrity and moral virtues it has inherited from the past and at the same time, establish sustainable relationships of mutual respect with Muslims and other minority communities? Lessons learned from this study suggest at least two complementary answers.

The first of these ways is to support and deepen the ongoing discussion within the sangha, and in the attentive public, on the long-term merit of introducing secular education to monastic schools that currently specialize exclusively in Buddhist scriptures. Rural monasteries that admit an increasingly number of uneducated children from poor households must receive special attention to their financial and pedagogical needs for this purpose. The three subjects that some senior leaders of the sangha are currently considering (as of August 2013) – mathematics, computer skills, and English – will become a promising start. A gradual increase in the number of additional subjects, such as history and geography for elementary education, and philosophy, comparative religions, and peace studies for higher education, will enable the future generations of Buddhist leaders to think creatively, analytically, and self-reflectively to cope with the increasingly complex and interconnected world of globalization. One of the goals of a carefully defined scope of secular education is to enable future monks and nuns to sensitize their minds to the ever-expanding universe of cause-and-effect relationships in today's globalized society in which their well-intended actions and inactions can inadvertently generate structural violence, which in turn generates human suffering. Building structural awareness must therefore become a high priority in contemporary Buddhist education in search of structural peace that promotes a collective form of individual fulfillment. While the known objection to introducing such secular education to traditional monastery schools, especially those led by conservative Buddhist leaders, must be taken seriously, a sustained, systematic effort must be made to carry out dialogue with them, in view of the long-term prosperity of the Buddhist sangha in the reality of the twenty-first century.

The second approach to expand structural awareness to build structural peace is to introduce a more balanced, empirical, and multi-angled interpretation – and perhaps even a purposeful reinterpretation – of essential Buddhist discourses and symbols which are currently used to mobilize the sangha and the public. One of the most significant examples of such interpretive acts is the way in which the meaning of the 969 symbol is defined and propagated in the ongoing effort to create Buddhist unity.

The 969 leaders that the author has interviewed provided a detailed explanation of the 969 symbol. As previously mentioned, this symbol is taken from the image of the elegantly decorated pillar that King Ashoka of the Maurya dynasty had constructed in the third century BC. Their explanation of the pillar highlighted the virtues of an ideal Buddhist practitioner, such as a commitment to unity and strength, all associated with each of the components of the Ashoka pillar. What their explanation did not offer, knowingly or unknowingly, is the broader historical context and meaning of the pillar's construction, as well as the defining characteristics of King Ashoka's reign from 268 BCE to 232 BCE.

While King Ashoka was a committed Buddhist, he actively supported Hindu, Jain, Ajivika, and diverse other religions. He encouraged the diverse religious communities to work together to build social harmony. He strove to prevent any acts that would marginalize and persecute other religions. To quote King Ashoka's edict, in which he is referred to as Priyadarsi:

King Priyadarsi honors men of all faiths, members of religious orders and laymen alike, with gifts and various marks of esteem. Yet he does not value either gifts or honors as much as growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths. This growth may take all forms, but its root is in guarding one's speech to avoid extolling [sic] one's own faith and disparaging the faith of others improperly (Nikam & McKeon, 1959, p. 51)

The edict goes on to state:

The faiths of others all deserve to be honored for one reason or another. By honoring them, one exalts one's own faith and at the same time performs a service to the faith of others. By acting otherwise, one injures one's own faith and also does disservice to that of others. For if a man extols his own faith and disparages another because of devotion to his own and because he wants to glorify it, he seriously injures his own faith.

Therefore concord alone is commendable, for through concord men may learn and respect the conception of Dharma accepted by others.

King Piyadarsi desires men of all faiths to know each other's doctrines and to acquire sound doctrines. Those who are attached to their particular faiths should be told that King Priyadarsi does not value gifts or honors as much as growth in the qualities essential to religion in men of all faiths. (Nikam & McKeon, 1959, pp. 51-52)

Upon examining these and other historical sources, Hajime Nakamura (1994), a leading scholar of Buddhism, observes that King Ashoka, like other prominent early Buddhist thinkers, sought to remove prejudices, understand the foundations of diverse philosophical traditions, and try to embrace and transcend their differences. Nakamura (1994) also maintains that Ashoka and his contemporaries saw Buddhism as a path to enlightened awareness that could enable its practitioners to recognize the virtues and strengths of diverse other religions and philosophies, and to find ways to actively build on them to create universal value and to benefit them all.

In view of this historical background, what would a contemporary application of King Ashoka's vision to Myanmar's multi-religious society look like? It would mean creating an inclusive Buddhist-majority society in which Buddhist leaders proactively reach out to learn from Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, and other faith traditions and strive to find ways in which Buddhism can help these religious communities to fulfill their own spiritual potential as partners and contributors to a peaceful multi-religious society. Importantly, public education and dialogue aimed at realizing such a Buddhist vision consist of finding an ideal image of the future that a more multi-angled, empirical, and holistic understanding of the past will generate. To paraphrase John Paul Lederach (2005), a leading peacebuilding scholar-practitioner, the past, as a collective legacy, is in front of the present, and an authentic memory of the past can shed light on what the sangha should do in the future. To realize this vision, however, Buddhist leaders must reflect self-critically on their worldviews. They must resist the temptation to fit a preferred image of the past to justify a narrowly-defined need of the present. To practice Buddhism in the increasingly interconnected world of the twenty-first century, responsible Buddhist leaders must promote a more empirically-grounded, multi-angled inquiry into familiar Buddhist teachings and symbols that they habitually use to mobilize public action.

The two suggested approaches to building structural awareness outlined above – one on the introduction of secular education and the other on the reexamination of popularized Buddhist discourses and symbols – are both essential for the future of the Burmese Buddhist community. However, in order to apply structural awareness to the transformation of intercommunal conflicts

to which the Buddhist community is presently a party, it must also consider practicing more concrete and proactive initiatives that help improve Buddhists' relationships with other religious communities. One of the possible ways in which Buddhists can practice structural awareness to this end is to reexamine the Buddhist sangha's approach to interreligious marriage.

As discussed earlier, the Buddhist sangha's national movement to petition the national government for its passage of the proposed laws reflects their proponents' fear of losing Myanmar's Buddhist-majority identity and its moral character. As a number of Buddhist and Muslim interviewees have pointed out in the course of the present inquiry, many of the perceived problems concerning interreligious marriage, population growth, and religious conversion are inseparably linked to socio-economic deprivation and the lack of basic education. In parts of Myanmar in which Muslim-Buddhist marriages concern Buddhists, Buddhist girls and their families accept interreligious marriages with financially established Muslim men as means to ensure their livelihood and survival. One way of applying Buddhist structural awareness to the interconnected problem of poverty, illiteracy, and religious conversion is to ask different questions than what the Buddhist community is currently asking: What can both Buddhist and Muslim leaders do together to uplift the socio-economically deprived communities from abject poverty and provide them with basic education? What can they do to expand the freedom of choices for Buddhist girls, their families, and their Muslim neighbors with respect to marriage, livelihood opportunities, and religious practices? What if the significant amount of resources, time, and political capital dedicated to the Buddhist national movement on the marriage issue is rechanneled to promote such educational and development initiatives? What if both Buddhist and Muslim leaders actively promote interreligious dialogues in which they, together with their community members at the grassroots level, confront the deep roots of their historical mistrust and fear that gave rise to the Buddhist national movement in the first place?

Once the Burmese Buddhist community recognizes the value of these questions, many evocative precedents of Buddhist-led development and dialogue initiatives become relevant to its future. One of the most compelling examples of such initiatives is the Sarvodaya Shramadana movement in Sri Lanka. (Sarvodaya means progress of all, and Shramadana means a gift of work.) Established in 1958 by A. T. Ariyaratne, this Buddhist-led movement of participatory development empowers the poor and strengthens community ties in over fifteen thousand of Sri Lanka's twenty-four thousand villages (King, 2009). While Theravada Buddhist offers the

spiritual foundations of the movement, it actively engages participants of all religious, ethnic, and political backgrounds. In each of the villages in which the Sarvodaya moment is introduced, villagers discuss their development needs and work together to build roads, schools, clean water systems, latrines, or other forms of basic infrastructure that help them meet their needs. In addition to promoting development, the movement's leader Ariyaratne convenes conciliation dialogues between political, ethnic, and religious communities, including Buddhists and Muslims (Queen, 2003).

Whether the Burmese Buddhist community chooses a path to inclusive development and interreligious dialogue that the Sarvodaya movement exemplifies depends on how seriously it is willing to face difficult questions about its history and identity. Answering these questions requires Buddhist practitioners' willingness to reconcile their individual spiritual commitment with their collective responsibility to overcome the structural roots of the existing religious tension. This process of reflection and dialogue also requires Burmese Buddhists' self-motivated choice to become active contributors to building a truly inclusive and democratic nation while confronting the deep culture and structure of exclusive nationalism.

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Attachment 1: Map of Myanmar



Adopted from:

<http://www.bing.com/images/search?q=map+of+Myanmar&id=FAE4D9FDC8EFCA08B22E18BCEEC41FAE23CBFF92&FORM=IQFRBA#view=detail&id=FAE4D9FDC8EFCA08B22E18BCEEC41FAE23CBFF92&selectedIndex=0>

Attachment 2: The 969 symbol



Adopted from: <http://lionsroar.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/969-symbol.jpg>